The Reactionary Prophet of Silicon Valley

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Chris Lehmann October 27, 2022

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(Getty Images)

In a sanely configured political-media sphere, Curtis Yarvin—the blogger formerly known as "Mencius Moldbug"—would be confined to the fringe Internet discussion boards that originally helped him spring to intellectual life. But Yarvin, the dean of the so-called neoreactionary movement among the Silicon Valley Neteratti, is having another breakout moment, as the restive, grievance-fueled American right careens toward the 2022 midterms. Over at *Vox*, Andrew Prokop has published an extensive interview with and intellectual profile of Yarvin, who has long and loudly argued that democracy is an outmoded conceit that the American system is well rid of. The next phase of political evolution, he contended in his now-dormant blog *Unqualified Reservations* and in sporadic commentary since, involves a grateful embrace of dictatorship and/or monarchy, so that the real forces running the world can get the job done without all the pointless and messy shadow play of mass consensus.

Yarvin's present claim to fame is that GOP Senate hopefuls Blake Masters in Arizona and J.D. Vance in Ohio have both favorably cited a key plank of his plan for post-democratic overhaul—the strongman plan to "retire all government employees," which goes by the jaunty mnemonic "RAGE." As Yarvin envisions it, RAGE is the great purge of the old operating system that clears the path for a more enlightened race of technocrats to seize power and launch the social order on its rational course toward information-driven self-realization. Collateral casualties in this "reboot" will be the nexus of pusillanimous yet all-powerful institutions Yarvin has dubbed "the Cathedral"—the universities, the elite media, and anything else that's fallen prey to liberal perfidy as the heroic apostles of hard-right digital truth-telling have come wearily to know it.

Yarvin hastens to add, amid his reactionary reveries, that this is not an old blood-and-soil brand of ethnic or racialized fascism—though Yarvin, like many Silicon Valley acolytes of the far right, has left an ugly trail of race-baiting trollery in his wake. Corey Pein documented this strain of Yarvin's thought in one of the earliest exposés of the neoreactionary movement, which I was proud to help publish in my former capacity as an editor at *The Baffler*:

> "I am not a white nationalist, but I do read white-nationalist blogs, and I'm not afraid to link to them…I am not exactly allergic to the stuff," Yarvin writes. He also praises a blogger who advocated the deportation of Muslims and the closure of mosques as "probably the most imaginative and interesting right-wing writer on the planet." Hectoring a Swarthmore history professor, Yarvin rhapsodizes on colonial rule in Southern Africa, and suggests that black people had it better under apartheid. "If you ask me to condemn [mass murderer] Anders Breivik, but adore Nelson Mandela, perhaps you have a mother you'd like to fuck," Yarvin writes.
>
> His jargon may be novel, but whenever Mencius Moldbug descends to the realm of the concrete, he offers familiar tropes of white victimhood. Yarvin's favorite author, the nineteenth-century writer Scot Thomas Carlyle, is perhaps best known for his infamous slavery apologia, "Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question." "If there is one writer in English whose name can be uttered with Shakespeare's, it is Carlyle," Yarvin writes. Later in the same essay Yarvin calls slavery "a natural human relationship" akin to "that of patron and client."

Prokop revisits the racist strain of Yarvin's blogging past in a brief paragraph, citing Yarvin's belief in "biological roots of intelligence" that play a role in creating alleged disparities in intelligence among different groups. He also includes a disclaimer from Yarvin claiming that racism is

“despicable” and that Europeans have no innate “moral superiority” over rival ethnic or racial groups. This all adds up, naturally, to classic both-sidesing of race hate; a case for the “biological roots of intelligence” cannot be placed alongside a denunciation of racism in a way that makes the latter remotely coherent. This is the supine journalistic posture that the alt right has long exploited to its own advantage. (For good measure, Prokop repeats the one-paragraph-of-controversy treatment in discussing Yarvin’s plainly fascist outlook; that discussion, too, resolves in an arcane and unconvincing Yarvin alibi—he’s a monarchist, not a fascist!—that effectively crowds out all substantive engagement with the question.)

The alt-white character of Yarvinism apparently can now be readily dispensed with, since the American right is already primed, in its post-January 6 incarnation, to endorse all the other major elements of Yarvin’s program. The litany is by now familiar: Congress is reviled; the court system is sclerotic; federal bureaucracies are frustratingly outmoded and buggy. So bring on the enlightened (or variably enlightened) despot! “You’re not that far from a world in which you can have a candidate” aligned with such a program, Yarvin coyly tells Prokop. “I think you can get away with it. That’s sort of what people already thought was happening with Trump. To do it for real is not going to make them much more hysterical, and”—here Prokop records “he laughed”—”it’s actually much more effective!”

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Yarvin’s fascist enthusiasms have migrated into the mainstream right thanks largely to the support of billionaire PayPal cofounder and original Facebook backer Peter Thiel, another 1990s-bred pseudo-intellectual of the Valley right, who famously announced in his own burst of Yarvinite glee in 2009 that “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible.” Thiel has been as good as his word, bankrolling secessionist projects on the right like the Seasteading Institute while also funding Yarvin’s own start-up, Tlon. Thiel also generously donates to hard-right political candidates; at the height of his on-again, off-again infatuation with Trump, he landed a speaking spot at the 2016 GOP national convention. Via his PAC, Thiel has racked up $15 million in donations to each of the Masters and Vance campaigns in this year’s primary cycle alone, but their subsequent campaign woes have prompted the wan *Bloomberg News* headline “Thiel-Backed Candidates Struggle to Connect with Donors Not Named Peter Thiel.”

That grim observation suggests that, even within the moneyed system of US campaigning, the Yarvin plan is more a product of the hothouse delusions of Silicon Valley moguldom than any organic groundswell of support. But that may be a distinction without a difference in a political system that coughed up the unlikely specter of Donald Trump, tribune of the common voter.

The chief selling point of Yarvinsim for the Trump faithful, Pein points out, is a shared political demonology—even though the right-wing brief against feckless liberal institutional rule comes across as something of a period piece in an age of open election-denying and coup-plotting on the

right. “It boggles my mind that people think there’s something profound to this concept of ‘the Cathedral,’ when it’s clearly just an abbreviated enemies list inspired by personal aggrievement and a fascist agenda,” Pein told *The Nation*. “If the universities, the news media, and even the federal bureaucracy are so all-powerful, why are those institutions even debating whether Trump should be charged in relation to his January 6 coup attempt? It’s not the strength but the weakness of those institutions, and the dominance of capital, that has gotten us to where we are.”

This latter point, more than any other, highlights the true nature of the neoreactionary threat. “As a writer, I find it depressing that one rich man’s favor can elevate pseudo-intellectual fascist dreck to this exalted status,” Pein says. “What’s worse is that Thiel’s money has put us all in the position of needing to defend fundamental values such as the right of people to select their own leaders through a fair and transparent process, and equality under the law. This twisted anti-democracy ideology is as much a product of Silicon Valley as any app or gadget. The elevation of Yarvin to Republican luminary is an argument for confiscating and redistributing the wealth of all billionaires.”

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